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SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS OF A SUNNI WALKOUT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2468
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Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The Sunni Tawafuq party announced on July 25 that its six ministers would resign in seven days if their demands were not met (reftel B). The resignation of Vice President Tarik al-Hashimi might soon follow. Although the Sunnis insist they are not abandoning the political process (CoR delegates, for example, will not resign), their departure from the government would be perceived as a major setback to national reconciliation -- a perception that would have obvious repercussions on the September review process. Though a Sunni withdrawal might facilitate the passage of benchmark legislation, laws enacted in the wake of even a partial Sunni walkout would be a hollow victory. Moreover, a withdrawal would likely force many moderate Sunni leaders to flee Iraq, thereby strengthening Islamist and Ba'athist hardliners. Further estrangement of Sunnis from the political process could have security ramifications as well. These potential downsides likely outweigh the possible emergence of a more pragmatic Sunni leadership from the tribal shaykhs that have joined the fight against AQI. End summary.

PERCEIVED SETBACK FOR RECONCILIATION

¶12. (C) The six Tawafuq ministers threatened on July 25 to resign if their demands were not met. If the ministers quit the government, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi's resignation might not be far behind (Hashimi himself claims to have already submitted his resignation to President Talabani, but Tawafuq figures say they are not abandoning the political process: Hashimi will not immediately move to make his resignation effective if the ministers quit, and CoR members will not resign from the parliament). Given that for months Tawafuq has acted like, and been treated like, a de facto opposition party, the immediate political effect of its departure may be somewhat tempered so long as Hashimi is willing to participate in a meaningful leadership meeting. Whatever its practical effect, Tawafuq's departure would be perceived as a major setback to national reconciliation and as the undoing of two years of effort to bring the Sunnis into the political process.

PASSAGE OF LEGISLATION WITHOUT SUNNIS A HOLLOW VICTORY

¶13. (C) Ironically, Tawafuq's departure might actually facilitate passage of key benchmark legislation, most of which promotes Sunni interests. However, enacting benchmark legislation without Sunni buy-in would produce a hollow victory, since the benchmarks themselves are premised upon the notion of political compromise. Legislation passed by a

Shia/Kurdish coalition would likely be repudiated by the Sunni community, no matter its practical benefits.

POTENTIAL INCREASE IN VIOLENCE

¶4. (S/NF) In the short term, moderate Sunni Arab leaders like Tarik al-Hashimi (were he to follow through on his own resignation) and others in the Iraqi Islamic Party would likely have to leave Iraq for their own safety. (Al-Hashimi has recently moved his family to Jordan and, according to reporting in other channels, has looked into renting property there.) The political stock of hardliners like Shaykh Khalaf Allyan, Adnan Dulaymi, and Saleh Mutlaq would likely rise. Sunni hardliners would likely do better in provincial elections (which do not appear to be likely this year). Some Sunni moderates would proclaim public support for the "armed resistance to the occupiers and the Iranians" emboldening both al-Qaeda and the Ba'athist insurgency. The exodus of moderate, educated Sunni Arabs could increase, especially from Baghdad and Basra. There could be increased opposition to the U.S. presence in Iraq among newly radicalized Sunni Arabs in Iraq.

¶5. (C) In the mid-term, widespread Sunni disaffection might jeopardize the current Sunni tribal cooperation to eradicate al-Qaeda, with some tribes potentially rejoining the insurgency. Many of the Sunni tribes cooperating against al-Qaeda still have not reconciled with the Shia-dominated GOI, and the GOI has mostly failed to follow up on tribal cooperation with the government services that could begin to cement links with Sunni locals.

¶6. (C) Al-Qaeda might gain new recruits and sympathizers in

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Iraq and beyond. Shi'a hardliners might be emboldened to purge any remaining Sunnis from government and military positions, and ethnic cleansing of Sunni Arabs from Baghdad, Basra, parts of Salah ad-Din and Diyala could accelerate. Alternately, Sunni insurgents could join JAM in fighting the Coalition especially if both are locked out of the government. As intra-factional infighting between the Shi'a militias increases, the JAM and insurgent groups may find it tactically opportune to join forces and cooperate on a limited nationalist agenda to drive out the Coalition and the government that cooperates with it.

POTENTIAL UPSIDE, BUT MUCH UNCERTAINTY

¶7. (C) This admittedly gloomy scenario must be balanced against the possibility that Tawafuq's departure would permit the emergence of a new, more pragmatic set of leaders drawn from the local level, including from among Anbari shaykhs participating in the fight against AQI. Hashimi is clearly worried that he is losing his political base. Yet it remains unclear whether Tawafuq's loss of support represents a gain for Saleh Mutlak's Hewar party, the Muslim Brotherhood, the neo-Ba'athists in Syria, or the tribal shaykhs. Moreover, while some of the tribal shaykhs may be formidable on their own turf, they are unlikely to win over the Islamists who form the core of Tarik al-Hashimi's Iraqi Islamic Party. Consequently, it would be imprudent to assume that the shaykhs' current tactical cooperation on eradicating AQI will necessarily translate into a national political agenda based on reconciliation. Given these uncertainties, the downsides to Tawafuq's departure probably outweigh the potential benefit.

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